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ABSTRACT

Histories of rhetoric in composition studies have been determined largely by the politics of the discipline. Rhetoric tends to be thought of in a somewhat narrow sense, defined by the writing courses and programs of universities. The field has strengthened itself by researching the histories of rhetoric in the academy from classical time to the present. However, a question frequently asked by feminist historians when confronted by the standard histories is, "Well, yes, but what were women doing?" To answer this question, the researcher must go beyond the history of the academy (because women, for the most part, were not part of the institution until recently) and define rhetoric to include other types of writing not produced in academic institutions. Scholars must start seeing the history of rhetoric where they are not accustomed to seeing it: in the closets and attics and basements of their friends, colleagues, parents, and grandparents. Further, they must work on moving what they find there to archives where researchers will have access to them in the future. One feminist researcher found herself following an intriguing paper trail of feminist documents written by radical women in the early part of this century. Many of these documents were poorly bound and housed with little care on library shelves; others were found in private rooms. Sometimes it is difficult for the owner to part with them. Contains five references. (TB)

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Researching the Ephemeral

Histories of rhetoric in composition studies have been determined largely by the politics of the discipline. We have tended to think of rhetoric in a somewhat narrow sense, defined by the writing courses and programs of universities. We've justified and strengthened our professional existence by claiming Greek and Roman ancestry; we've traced the beginnings of current textbook adages to eighteenth-century Scottish universities; we've documented the abuse of teachers of writing in elite 19th century New England colleges; and we've reclaimed lost ancestors in early twentieth century Michigan universities. These histories have served us well. I would like to suggest that from this now-sturdy historical platform, we launch ourselves into less well-charted universes.

A question frequently asked by feminist social historians when confronted by the standard histories is: well, yes, but what were women doing? Although we can apply such a question to histories of university teaching, the fact of the matter is that most women haven't been in schools. Or if they were, they followed the rules pretty well while they were there, and it is only when they got out that some of them started writing really

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interesting things. So, I have two related suggestions. I would like to suggest, first, that in order to answer the question--what were women doing?--we look for rhetoric that may not purport to be rhetoric; that we see rhetoric where we haven't looked for rhetoric; that we shift away from the studies of how we used to teach and look instead at how some of our ancestors wrote--with or without education or perhaps in spite of it--and that we include in our studies the unsuccessful, the failed, and the lost causes, those places where women have sacrificed and lost or even perhaps compromised and won.

But why should we bother? Because we already know what a propositional argument looks like, and we know what happens when peers engage in formal argument. But the range of opportunities to take part in such debates is limited. It is far more frequently the case that persuasion must take place obliquely, that the audience must be seduced or caught unawares. In short, what we are much less familiar with are the various discursive means that people use to persuade when they aren't in positions of power---when they cannot count on ready access to a respectful audience.

My second suggestion is that we start seeing the history of rhetoric where we aren't accustomed to seeing it--in the closets and attics and basements of our friends, colleagues, parents, and grandparents--and that we work on placing these materials into archives where they will be accessible to researchers in the future.

To illustrate my first suggestion, let me describe some of my experiences in studying socialist, anarchist and trade unionist feminist writers from the turn of the century. These women, I came to realize, were consummate rhetors, devoting their lives to learning, developing, and persuading others of means they believed would improve human conditions. Perhaps they went to college; more likely they had a high school education or less. So we do not find these women writing textbooks. The one exception with which I am familiar is Marion Wharton, the mother of writer Meridel LeSueur, who wrote a composition textbook for the socialist correspondence school The People's College that flourished for a few years before World War I in Fort Scott, Kansas. [1]

There were few feminist publications at that time, so women addressing feminist issues had to write for the existing presses. For the most part, though, socialist and anarchist women wrote for socialist and anarchist publications or published their writings in pamphlets through organizational presses; thus, their writings were informed by, though not necessarily obscured by, the rhetorics of these organizations and frequently these writings show strong rhetorical evidence of the negotiation between feminist and socialist or anarchist programs, a topic of interest in itself. Where do we find these publications now? Some of them are on microfilm and some have been reprinted in hard copy; some are in archives.

My study began in 1984 when I was browsing through the shelves of a gay and lesbian bookstore in New York City and found a booklet about a radical feminist club, Heterodoxy, in New York City during the teens. The booklet was published in the 1980s by New Victoria Publishers, a small women's press. [2] I read it avidly. From there I found a book the Feminist Press had published of reprints of articles written in the 1920s by women who had been Heterodites. [3] Then I began searching out the works of one of these women, Inez Haynes Irwin. I found the bulk of her work in popular magazines of the period, a fascinating source of persuasive materials, as feminists planted their ideas in traditionally acceptable forms--romantic short stories, verses, and even prayers. I also discovered that she had been a member of the editorial collective of a socialist periodical, *The Masses*.

Reading this journal led me to more women writers and other publications. I found *The Progressive Woman*, *The International Socialist Review*, *The Intercollegiate Socialist*, *The Blast*, *The New York Call*, *The San Francisco Call*, *The Appeal to Reason*, *The National Rip-Saw*, *Life and Labor*, *New Solidarity*, and *Why?* I sought out every publication by every woman writer during the teens I could find. I found these publications in microfilm collections, such as the microfilmed documents of the Socialist Party Papers available from Duke University. They were sometimes held in the closed stacks of large libraries--I would send off a request and then wait for days for a tiny red-covered pamphlet to be returned to me. Often the last

checkout date was sometime in the 1920s. Sometimes I found, to my horror, that irreplaceable journals such as Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* or the successor to *The Masses*, *The Liberator*, were sitting on library open stacks--shoddily bound in string and cardboard--and crumbling. Sometimes, though, the documents couldn't be found at all by conventional means. Clearly the writings of these women were not privileged documents. But as I read those that are available, I came to see them not as the remnants of failed attempts to persuade, but as messages through time. One I found even addressed us:

> It will be curious reading to the grandchildren of the present generation that American women, endeavoring to march peaceably in the streets of the national capital, were hooted and jeered by the mob, and so set upon that three hundred of them had to be carried to hospitals for repair before the day was over. One young girl's foot was half crushed off by a policeman's horse, which suggests that the policeman was too enthusiastic in not doing his duty in protecting the marchers. It is almost like darkest England!
>
> However, we believe history will record that this was considerably of an exception, and that Uncle Sam;'s greatest crime to woman's plea for the ballot was a deaf ear which got cured gradually and in spots until the whole trouble was eradicated. ("The Women Marchers")

They reached me over time because the whole point had been to improve conditions for later generations.

And I began to see that these writers were seizing any opportunity to persuade: poems, stories, plays, songs, even English lessons for non-native speakers. [4] Knowing that they had only the most evanescent and fleeting connection with an audience, they made much more frequent use of entertaining and indirect metaphors, satire, irony, or parody as means of persuasion than they did of the school-taught propositional logics. These writers were masterfully shattering pieties by cleverly incongruous perspectives. They used multiple narrative voices to destabilize master narratives and to undermine the logical propositions of the dominant capitalist and patriarchal culture. I was surrounded by rhetoric, and little of it seemed strongly influenced by Aristotle, Quintilian, Alexander Bain or John Franklin Genung. Here were women who were responding appropriately and creatively to the exigencies and constraints of their rhetorical situations.

Did they win? Did these strategies succeed? Well, no. Generally speaking, no, they did not. Anarchists were deported; socialists were tarred and feathered by patriots or at least run out of town if they hadn't already factionalized themselves into oblivion; trade unionists were beaten and arrested; some feminists compromised and won the vote; some struggled for the eight-hour day and finally won that battle. However, to ask that women win in order to be recognized is to assume that language is everything and

that no other forces operate to create social and material conditions. And we all know better.

Finding some of the published writings of these writers made me want to see their papers. I wanted to see what they wrote to themselves about their campaigns, what letters they wrote to each other, what notes they made, what they had written that perhaps had never been published. But where were these papers? Most, I soon realized, weren't anywhere at all--thrown out by ignorant or frightened family members or perhaps destroyed by the writers themselves, not realizing the value of their own lives and work. Some I've found in state historical societies--Kate Richards O'Hare, who spent time in prison for her anti-war speeches, left her papers to the South Dakota Historical Society; some, such as the papers of Inez Haynes Irwin, are in such prestigious locations as Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. These papers yielded, among other things, an amusing account, from 1905, of writer Mary MacLane's attempt to seduce her. And there are notes for articles and books, as well, some of which she wrote and some she did not. Other papers, such as those of Mary Heaton Vorse, have been donated to the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. A check of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections told me whether the papers I wanted were in a collection included in that index.

There are many collections not included in this indexing system, however. With the Palmer Raids and other FBI abuses fresh in their minds, those who spent their lives working for social change often did not trust the traditional libraries to respect and care for their materials. They established alternative institutions to preserve their histories. These include such libraries as the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research in Los Angeles and the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. I recently learned about a small Wobbly library in Occidental, California. These organizations, though, are notoriously underfunded. The Lesbian Herstory Archives was located until very recently in someone's apartment. The Southern California Library is in an old Safeway store in Watts; community respect prevented it from being torched a few years ago.

This brings me to my second point: preservation. I just finished helping a woman in my community organize and send her late husband's papers to the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State. Her husband, who dropped out of school after the eighth grade in order to work to support himself, was an organizer for the Young People's Socialist League, a Wobbly, a Communist organizer, and finally a Teamsters organizer. His papers included his memoirs, pictures, letters, and clippings from his long life of persuading people to work together and to look out for each other.

How many of us know people with such materials languishing in closets? I think of my friends in Portland who have the history of the early

1970s women's movement in their basements--letters, minutes of meetings, articles. There are several reasons that we may choose to ignore the question of preservation. One is, of course, the fact that many of us can remember the writings, so they seem unimportant to us. But the owner of one particular basement I have in mind is turning 60 this year.

The next problem is the matter of where to send the materials. I want my friend to package these things up and send them to the Oregon Historical Society or perhaps the state library. But why not an alternative institution? Alternative institutions are crucial for papers that other archives will not accept or will treat with disdain. But alternative institutions often lack money; they cannot participate in national indexing endeavors; they are unable to offer grants to researchers seeking to use their collections--or even remain open for researchers to work more than a few hours a week. Although the state historical society may not be the most hospitable place imaginable, curators there will probably keep materials safely warehoused until a researcher comes along who wishes to organize and make use of them. I am reminded of a local Sonoma County woman, Mary Anne Ashley, nicknamed "Mad Dog Sweetie," who

> spent the last two decades of her life unearthing details of the forgotten lives of women, labor activists and political radicals; from this work, she created the Ashley Collection at the State Library in Sacramento, a depository for these histories, as well

> as for many out-of-print historical posters, documents, and publications. (Wind 8)

On the other hand, alternative institutions can be supported and built up. Lesbian and gay historical societies have been quite successful recently in gaining support and increasing their holdings and availability.

Finally, we may find it hard to let materials go; we find it hard to admit that a particular time is over, that it has become a historical moment. Yet I see the placement of documents in an archive not as the ending, but as the continuation of a life of activism, offering to future generations the opportunity to know and use the words that are working to persuade.

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[1] See my article "'Dear Comrade': Marion Wharton of The People's College, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1914-1917" in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 22.1-2 (1994): 119-133.

[2] Schwarz, Judith. *Radical Feminist of Heterodoxy*. Lebanon, NH: New Victoria Publishers, 1982. A revised edition was published in 1986.

[3] The original articles in Elaine Showalter's *These Modern Women* were published in *The Nation* during 1926-27.

[4] Violet Pike's "New World Lessons for Old World Peoples" were published in the Women's Trade Union League's *Life and Labor* during the teens.

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